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ABSTRACT

Three of the postulates elaborated and developed in "The Rhythmic Claims of Freedom and Discipline" by A.N. Whitehead contain implications for individualized learning. The first postulate states that the process of education envelopes three major periods--the stages of romance, precision, and generalization; the second postulate states that the principles of freedom and discipline should be adjusted to the individual's personality; and the third postulate deals with the role of the teacher in the learning process. These postulates, upon close examination, suggest that educators must learn from the mistaken practices of the past and invite the philosopher to return to his proper place at the heart of the educational process. (RB)

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INDIVIDUALIZED INSTRUCTION AND THE RHYTHMIC CLAIMS OF FREEDOM AND DISCIPLINE[1]

Lee H. Brown

Ralph Tyler (1950) suggests that educational goals be sifted through two screens--the screens of psychology and philosophy. And although individualized instruction does not seem to be an educational goal, it is generally justified in terms of learning outcomes. That is, certain behavioral changes are supposed to take place as a result of a program's being individualized; therefore, it seems most pertinent that INDIVIDUALIZED INSTRUCTION, which has already passed through the screen of psychology, be put to the test of philosophy. And this will be the business of the next few pages.

Specifically I have chosen the educational philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead to function as that screen. Few figures bridge the two cultures so magnificently--mathematician, logician, educator, administrator and defender of the arts.

I propose to begin by assigning some specific characteristics to the substance of our program before I submit it to the screen. I am concerned here about one particular kind of individualized program which may be more easily identified by the schemata in Figure 1.

1 A. N. Whitehead, "The Rhythmic Claims of Freedom and Discipline." In The Aims of Education and Other Essays. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1929. Pp. 29-41.

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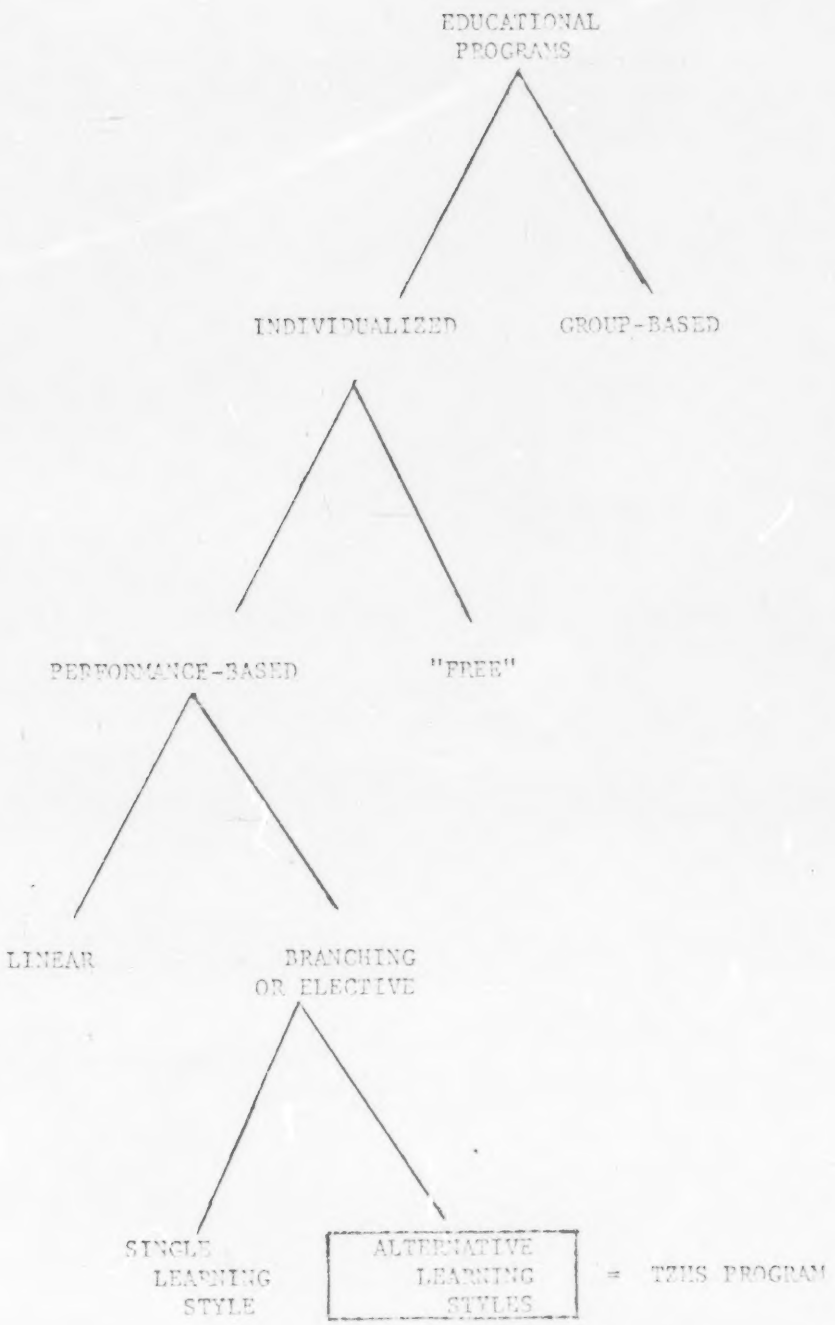

Figure 1. A branching tree diagram for learning programs.

The Tappan Zee program, less affectionately known as "The System," ironically enough, attempts to do just that --provide a rational base, or system, to the school's educational effort. Other discriptors which aren't necessarily obvious but are implied by the diagram are behavioral objectives, mastery learning, continuous progress, and learning activity packages. Other less crucial attributes are Resourse Centers, open registration, flexible scheduling, and variable staffing. And there are more--work-study, independent study, an extended school year, open campus--the list goes on like a bibliography of Dwight Allen training films.

These are of course the terms and concepts of contemporary individualized instruction; however, the task at hand requires that we use Professor Whitehead's definitions and constructs. The screen determines the shape, size, and texture of that which will pass through it.

In "The Rhythmic Claims of Freedom and Discipline," the construct begun earlier in "Aims of Education" is elaborated and developed. Three of its postulates seem to have special implications for individualized learning.

The <u>first postulate</u> states that the process of education is divided into three major periods-- The Stages of Romance, Precision and Generalization. These stages, like other stages of growth, are not discrete but are evolutionary--if the first

branches of the tree die, the whole tree dies.

The Stage of Romance is dominated by an insistant curiosity which requires the freedom to explore. In the learning of language, this stage generally begins in infancy and extends into elementary school. The Stage of Romance is crucial because it supplies the bedrock of interest and meaningfulness upon which the behaviors and expectations of the later stages are predicted. It is the teacher's task to "prevent the dryrot of inert ideas" by keeping this Romance alive during all of the stages of learning. The individualizing teacher in an elective program seems to have some special advantages toward this end; however, the concept of "behavioral objectives" seems to present some special difficulties.

Whitehead's discussion of "inert ideas" will tend to make any behaviorist slightly uncomfortable. The behavioral objective, in spite of the fact that it represents a dynamic competency, too often lies passively on the unit record sheet. The Learning Activity Package reflects the behaviorist's prescription for learning success. This approach implies the easy "small-bite-at-a-time" path to success and presumes as axiomatic the notion that all subjects can be learned in this way. Perhaps subjects can, but will competencies acquired through safe, low-frustration methods maintain the Romance and sustain the excitement that more spontaneous and risky encounters with learning provide?

The second stage, the Stage of Precision, is characterized by mastery--"knowing the subject exactly, and for retaining in the memory its salient features (p. 34)." This stage usually occurs during grades 4 through 10. The Stage of Precision requires some special explanation if mis-interpretation is to be avoided. The desire for Precision is the natural offspring of the Stage of Romance. If Romance dies, Precision becomes a "bastard" in every sense of the word. Far too often, even in our individualized program, the erring teacher tends to make the discipline an <u>end</u> rather than the <u>means</u> to more "intimate" freedom that it should properly become.

The third stage, Whitehead calls the Stage of Generalization. For the English disciplines, begun early, this period should be in full sway by the end of the child's high school experience. During the Stage of Generalization interests and skills combine with immediate experience to bring the ...

> "individual toward a comprehension of the art of life; and by the art of life I (Whitehead) mean the most complete achievement of varied activity expressing the potentialities of that living creature in the face of its actual environment (p. 39)."

At this point, the learner should be able to achieve an "understanding of an insistent present"--"an understanding of the stream of events which pass through his life, which is his life," But again how many behavioral objectives--most of which are nearly packaged products of the curriculum reform

movement-- carry the power to provice this kind of understanding? Given Whitehead's definition that "Education is the acquisition of the art of the utilization of knowledge," we need to ask if we have opened up the school enough. If the teacher is to help weave the seamless coat, he must give the student more than a collection of threads. He must, as Whitehead puts it, "make the pupil see the woods by means of the trees." The success of the individualized program is predicted upon the ability of the teacher to understand how each child sees education as an immediate force in his life--an understanding which exists only sporadically and somewhat amateurishly in the best of circumstances.

The second postulate states that the "two principles, freedom and discipline are not antagonists but should be so adjusted in the child's life that they correspond to a natural sway...of the developing personality (p. 30)" Since the "developing personality," is a unique commodity, it would seem reasonable that only those instructional techniques which are accommodating to this kind of growth would be considered as being supportive of the process of education. This too sounds like the province of individualized instruction.

A. N. Whitehead clearly repeats that the "development of the whole personality must be attended to." At this point, it is reasonable to inquire how we as teachers of English have gone about this business. My frank reply would be that we have

barely begun. The "developing personality" of the child continues to be an "untouchable" in the field of education in spite of a varitable plethora of small group interaction techniques, transactional analysis, and Whitehead's intimation that it is the matter that determines whether we succeed or fail as educators.

In some ways the traditional teacher had an edge in the area of involvement with the total personality. The schoolmarm of the Post-Victorian era was a direct assult on the developing personality. Her cold penetrating look, her vicious sarcastic tongue, and breastbeating morality told students they were dealing with a formidable critic of the entire process of growing up. In short, she was a dragon to be slain--a rite of passage to a personal life of the mind; and, in this way, she dramatically participated in the personality growth of a particular kind of student. Unfortunately for most the dragon usually won.

The suburbanite teacher seems to find participation a bit more difficult. In the early days of our program troublesome epithets like "learning facilitator" and "resource person" seemed to imply that one hid his personality under a bushel. For some, the new program implied "non-directive" behavior. Other teachers openly referred to themselves as being "dethroned" and glared silently at their students as if they were so many rebel peasants.

Some opponents of individualized learning even developed self-defeating strategies such as handing out Learning Activity Packages and telling their pupils to work quietly while they sat

behind their desks and waited for the inevitable frustration and failure.

As the program developed and ties loosened and jackets gave way to sweaters, new patterns of informality seemed to evolve; however, only sporadically has this new informality translated itself into teacher/learner relationships which truly do attend to the total personality of the learner. Commuting teachers, 100% bussing of students, the suburban cultural milieu all seem to prevail against the occurance of this kind of involvement; and, more often than not, it seems to me that neither side wants it.

Schools seem to have little use for the total personality. What schools measure are the results of teaching for precision. These results, which are in New York the PEP Test scores, SAT scores, Regents scores, rarely are connected in a primary way to the intellectual life of the learner; they are at best secondary reinforcers evoking visceral responses to artificial experiences.

The third postulate deals with the role of the teacher. Whitehead states:

> It is for him (the teacher) to elicit the enthusiasm by resonance from his own personality, and to create the environment of a larger knowledge and a firmer purpose. He is there to avoid the waste...(p. 39).

This somewhat grand role description is restrained, however, by a more modest companion statement:

But for all your (teacher) stimulation and guidance,

> the creative impulse toward growth come from within and is intensely characteristic of the individual (p. 39).

Let us examine more closely the teaching skills implied by this role. First of all, he must be able to select the appropriate learning environment for the "child's stage of growth and it must be adopted to individual needs." This environment must, as Whitehead says, "answer the call to life within the child." A second competency is the ability to "discover in practice that exact balance between freedom and discipline which will give the greatest rate of progress over the things to be known (p. 35)."

I think, each competency is in part at least an art, but art requires nurture. Both material and policy are required to give the teacher a reasonable chance of finding that balance.

Flexible scheduling, open registration, learning activity packages form part of the means of providing that support and hundreds of thousands of dollars have been expanded in the past few years to provide that support. However, spending money on in-service education and voting in policies can not guarantee the success of an artistic endeavor for, as Whitehead notes, there "is no abstract which will give information applicable to all subjects, to all types of pupils, or to each individual pupil, except indeed the formula of rhythmic sway." (p.35)

I suggest individualized instruction offers no abstract formula but does offer new opportunities to discover each child's rhythmic sway.

In summary, after all of the screening is finished, what are the results? Now let us examine our siftings. In the deposit it is possible to detect some good education--the discipline of the mastery learning, the freedom of the student to choose his teacher, the responsibility for selecting courses, and high moments during personalized study projects when the "mastery of knowledge (becomes) the most intimate freedom attainable." (p. 30) And most important, during the 30% of the day when both teacher and learner are unscheduled, student and learners sometimes do find each other and the "rhythmic sway"; at this point, wisdom begins to happen and education becomes the noblest of professions.

In the residue, we find an uneven mixture of course gravel and fool's gold--we find organizational clumsiness, educational practices valued more than education and all of the old evils which have plagued man since the struggle began.

In the mix, we observe a number of uninvited concomitants to the practice of individualized instruction. Individualized instruction is controversial; the teacher had to become political. Individualized instruction is expensive; the administrator had to be armed with improved scores, to defend it. Individualized instruction generates an endless wave of details; a monumental

paper shuffling effort was required to manage these details. Individualized instruction is infinitely demanding in terms of planning for learning styles, interests and capabilities: the teacher must constantly struggle to find the point at which he stops planning on the basis of identified needs and shifts to a more general reliance on the strength of his own intellectual interests and habits.

And at last we have the conclusion that the philosophy of A. N. Whitehead makes a fine screen. But was the screen too fine? I think not. We are in an era when universal ineptitude is justified in the name of personal freedom and the technology of education threatens to overwhelm us with complex practices that are nice in their sophistication but hallow in substance. Whitehead warned, "...when ideals have sunk to the level of practice, the results is stagnation (p. 29)." Watergate, the cult of nostalgia, the energy crisis, the success of William Peter Blatty all seem to testify to a moral/spiritual paralysis that pales Joyce's Dublin by comparison. It seems reasonable that the old education take a large share of the blame for this condition. The new education, for which individualized instruction has become the rallying cry, must learn from the indiscretions of the past and invite the philosopher to return to his proper place at the heart of the educational process.